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Published online: 20 Dec 2024.

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Inclusion of students with disabilities in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): a systematic review

P. Solís-García[a] (iD), A. Barreiro-Collazo[a] (iD), M. Rodríguez-Correa[a] (iD), E. Delgado-Rico[a] (iD) and S. Real-Castelao[b] (iD)

[a]Faculty of Education, International University of La Rioja, Logrono, Spain; [b]Faculty of Education, University of Leon, Leon, Spain

ABSTRACT

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), established after the Bologna Declaration with the goal of its implementation by 2010, presents areas for improvement in fulfilling its principle of inclusive and quality education for students. After over a decade of development, a systematic review on the inclusion of students with disabilities was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis method to understand the interest in this area, measured by the volume of publications, the methodology employed and the themes addressed. The results indicate a high level of research interest, with a tendency towards quantitative investigations and six areas of focus: perceptions and opinions of students with disabilities, attitudes and perceptions towards disability, professional development and teacher training, accessibility and technology in higher education, policies and programs for students with disabilities and barriers and adjustments in the university environment. A common focus emerges, highlighting the existing challenges in achieving a fundamental right: the right to inclusive and quality education within this space. Future research through more extensive and diverse studies is crucial to substantiate the existing findings and apply the identified measures required for enhancing inclusion.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), established through the university reform commonly known as the Bologna Plan or Declaration (European Minister, 1999), originates in the Magna Charta Universitarium. This was signed by more than 500 universities in 1986 in Bologna (European Universities, 2008). This significant agreement transformed universities across European Union countries, extending beyond alignment of degrees. The reform introduces various principles, including the removal of barriers and the free movement of students, with a strong emphasis on ensuring access to educational opportunities. This principle materialized in curriculum plans with credit equivalences (European Credit Transfer System) and led to the establishment of support services for students with disabilities. These services were a legal requirement in member countries like Spain (LOU, 2001), marking a milestone in institutionalizing measures to secure rights for people with disabilities.

With the implementation of support services, which catered to the needs of existing university students and the requests for assistance and training from faculty members in providing individualized support, progress was made towards equal opportunities in the retention and graduation of enrolled students. This progress also standardized the access conditions for students who entered undergraduate studies due to inclusion laws at earlier levels.

The initial deadline for implementing the EHEA was set for 2010. Since then, improvement plans and strategic frameworks have been established at both European and national levels, including initiatives like the European Universities Initiative, projected through 2025 (European Commission, 2020), and strategies aimed at advancing the rights of people with disabilities within the EU by 2030 (European

Commission, 2021). However, EHEA implementation is currently framed as desirable goals or indicators rather than enforced requirements, lacking a binding mandate. This limitation hinders meaningful change at the institutional level and fails to ensure equal opportunities and rights across member states. The diversity in national policies further compromises the EHEA's mission to provide consistent educational assurances. Notably, the EU's foremost social right underscores education, inclusive quality training and lifelong learning as a priority (European Commission, 2020).

UNESCO (1994), in the Salamanca Statement, defines inclusion as an educational approach that "recognizes and responds to the diversity of needs among all learners by fostering greater participation in learning, cultures and communities, while reducing exclusion within and from education" (p. 6). This concept remains pertinent today in the attainment of UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (2015), which continues to advocate for urgent measures to achieve the right to 'education for all', more than 20 years later. Taking as a foundation the premise that education is a fundamental pillar for the genuine inclusion of individuals with disabilities, public administrations must ensure the existence of an education system that is as inclusive as possible. This system aims to achieve equal opportunities in developing educational and occupational activities for this group (Garabal-Barbeira et al., 2018). In today's competitive Western job market, where certifications for acquired skills and protective employment measures for individuals with disabilities are essential, efforts have still fallen short in ensuring that the employability, defined as the ability to gain and maintain meaningful employment, of this group aligns with that of the working-age population without disabilities. For example, in one of the countries within the EHEA, Spain, only 1% of individuals who obtain a university degree have a disability (National Institute of Statistics, 2023). However, the employment insertion, defined as the integration of individuals, particularly from disadvantaged groups, into the workforce, remains 10 percentage points lower than that of the reference population, despite various employment promotion and protection measures. In the Spanish context, these measures include a job reservation quota of 2% in the private sector and 5% in the public sector (Observatorio Estatal de la Discapacidad, 2022). This low insertion rate may be due to a mismatch of profiles to positions in some cases, given the low graduation rate, but also to prejudice by recruiters in the private sector (Real Castelao et al., 2023).

It is important to emphasize that individuals with disabilities still face significant challenges in completing their studies at the university level (De los Santos et al., 2019). Other studies in the field highlight the role of the teaching staff, which is pivotal in inclusive processes. There is a consensus on the need for continuous training for faculty members, both in pedagogical matters and those related to addressing diversity in general (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Hong, 2015; Lipka et al., 2019; Mayo et al., 2020; Pascual-Arias et al., 2022; Wray & Houghton, 2018). Interestingly, such training is not a requirement for university teaching positions, despite data showing that when faculty members receive disability-focused training, their motivation and sensitivity towards the realities of diversity in the classroom increase (Carballo et al., 2021).

Research also found that the barriers to inclusion faced by students with disabilities can be architectural, methodological or social. Among these, it is the social barriers that cause the most concerning for students with disabilities (Biggeri et al., 2020; Martins & Moriña, 2022; Moriña & Carballo, 2020; Odame et al., 2021; Zabeli et al., 2021).

Based on the available some authors question whether the regulations, strategies and plans that have been implemented or are currently underway are effective in ensuring a higher education that is of quality, inclusive and non-discriminatory. Alternatively, they consider whether, despite the expenditure, the efforts made are insufficient to guarantee the rights recognized by existing legislation (Alegre-Sánchez et al., 2019; Álvarez & García-Cano, 2022).

Beginning with the regulatory framework and European strategies that guide national policies and programs, but which are not legally binding, it is necessary to systematically examine the literature to understand the current situation of students with disabilities in the EHEA. This effort aims to gain insight into the status of this group within the EHEA.

Methods and results

The overarching goal of this review is to systematically analyse publications that address the educational inclusion of students with disabilities within the EHEA. The intention is to conduct a comprehensive and

structured analysis of various approaches, practices and policies implemented in this domain. The aim is to identify the most effective strategies for students' with disabilities inclusion and educational success.

From this general goal, the following specific objectives are derived:

- Analyse which aspects of inclusion are addressed in the literature.
- Identify the barriers that students face in the EHEA.
- Understand which strategies are being implemented in the EHEA to enhance student inclusion.

Method

This systematic review is reported by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). However, since it does not involve a health outcome directly relevant to human health, it has not been registered in a systematic review registry such as PROSPERO. Additionally, due to the thematic variability encountered, conducting meta-analyses was not feasible.

Phenomenon of interest

The research questions guiding this review were:

1. What physical, technological, social and academic barriers limit the inclusion of students with disabilities in the EHEA?
2. What specific policies and programs designed to improve student inclusion in higher education are described in the literature?
3. What inclusive practices implemented have been effective in enhancing the inclusion of these students?

Study selection

Information sources and search strategy

This systematic review aimed to source complete works from primary publications available in the Web of Science (WOS), SCOPUS and PsycINFO databases. WOS and SCOPUS offer extensive coverage across various disciplines, which is beneficial for obtaining an interdisciplinary perspective or a broader overview of research in a specific field. Conversely, PsycINFO specializes in psychology and related areas, providing a more focused and detailed search in these domains. This approach facilitated access to a pertinent set of databases for the topic under investigation. To locate the articles, keywords from the APA Thesaurus, 'inclusion' AND 'students' AND 'disabilit*' AND 'higher education' OR 'universit*', were used.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Our inclusion criteria involved the following: (1) full text articles published in a peer-reviewed journal, in English or Spanish from 2018 to March 2023, this date range was chosen to capture the most recent developments and trends in the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. This period was selected to ensure the review includes the latest research and reflects current practices and policies following significant educational reforms and technological advancements in the EHEA. (2) Empirical article (quantitative or qualitative) about the educational inclusion of students with disabilities in the EHEA.

We excluded the following articles: (1) non-peer-reviewed chapters of books, dissertations, critiques, abstracts of conferences and other theoretical studies lacking empirical data, (2) articles that focused on non-university students (e.g. primary, secondary), (3) studies conducted outside the EHEA and (4) other topics.

Data screening and extraction

Figure 1 displays the article selection flowchart according to PRISMA (Page et al., 2021). Five authors searched three databases using the mentioned descriptor terms, resulting in 523 articles. These articles were imported into EndNote, and after removing duplicate items, 206 articles were reviewed individually by five authors by reading their abstracts to assess their relevance to the topic, and then the selected
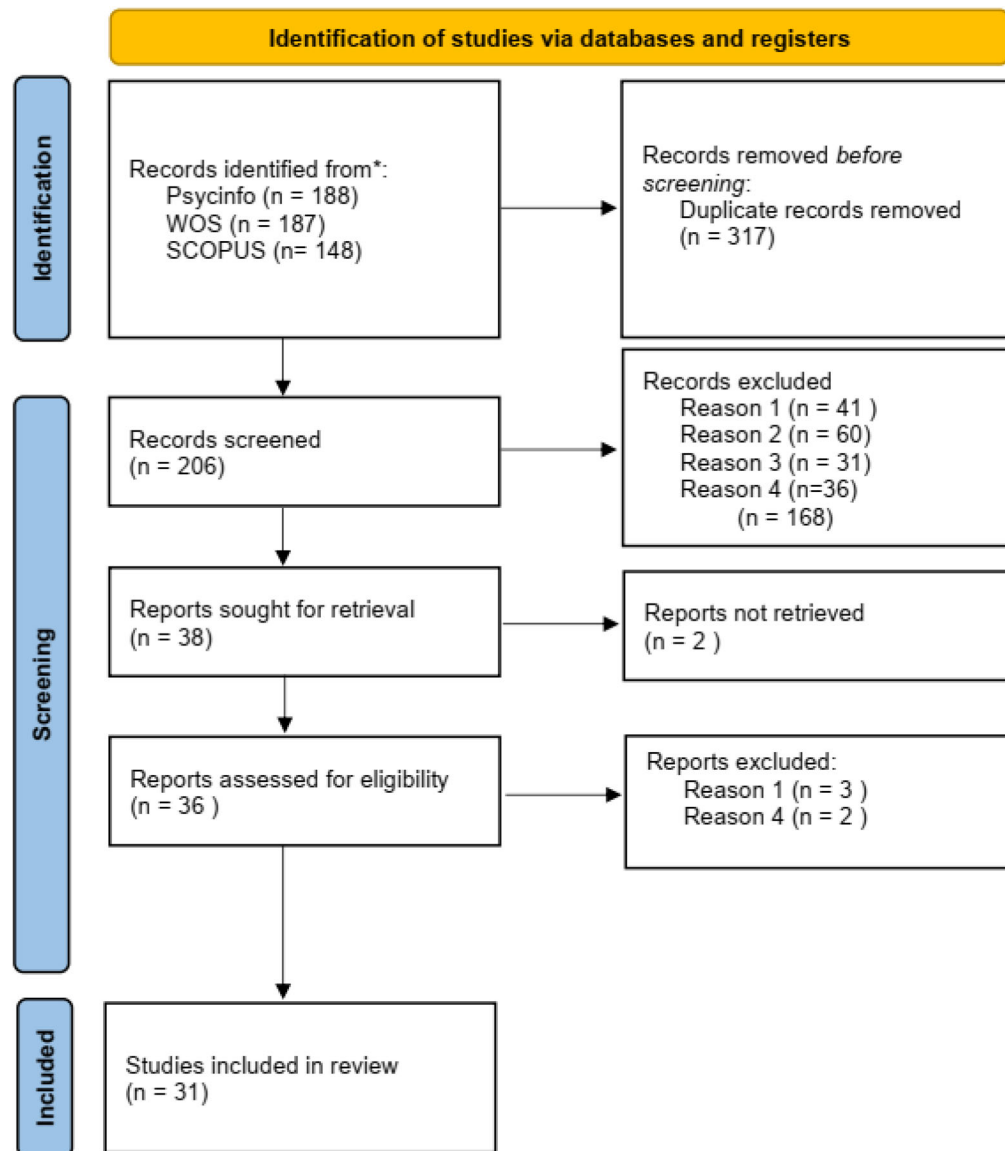
Reason 1: Studies lacking empirical data.

Reason 2: Non-university student population.

Reason 3: Studies conducted outside the EHEA.

Reason 4: Not related to the topic of interest.

Figure 1. Article selection process. Reason 1: Studies lacking empirical data. Reason 2: Non-university student population. Reason 3: Studies conducted outside the EHEA. Reason 4: Not related to the topic of interest.

articles were discussed collectively. A total of 168 articles were excluded: 41 were theoretical studies lacking empirical data, 60 did not address inclusion in a university context, 31 addressed inclusion in non-EHEA university institutions and 36 were unrelated to the topic of interest.

Of the 38 articles sought for retrieval, access to 2 could not be obtained. Ultimately, after an in-depth reading of the 36 articles by five authors, 5 articles were excluded based on exclusion criteria (3 were studies conducted outside the EHEA and 2 were not related to the topic of interest). Comprehensive records of decisions regarding article inclusion were kept for thorough tracking; for this purpose, the Parsifal tool was utilized. Parsifal is an online tool designed to assist researchers in conducting systematic literature reviews within the field of software engineering.

Data synthesis

All the authors reviewed the articles before extracting and summarizing the data. The 31 articles were divided among the five authors, each creating a table for their assigned articles, while the rest supervised their colleagues' work to ensure accuracy. The data extraction table included the study's objectives, participants, study design and critical findings.

Due to the diverse outcome measures, a meta-analysis was impossible; thus, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. Findings were structured by categorizing studies based on the inclusion of students with disabilities in university settings, examining and analysing them to identify common themes and patterns. Additionally, variations in sample characteristics, methodological design and quality were considered, highlighting significant trends.

This review only included peer-reviewed articles, potentially introducing publication bias. Unpublished studies, grey literature or research in other languages were not included. The inclusion criteria limited the review to articles published between 2018 and July 2023, which might exclude earlier studies that could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Access limitations prevented the retrieval of two articles, which could introduce bias. Subjective judgement in relevance assessment by the five researchers, despite efforts for consistency, may still vary. Lastly, not conducting a meta-analysis limits the ability to quantify overall effect size and assess statistical significance across studies.

Results

Study and participant characteristics

Our review included 31 studies involving 3351 university professors, 4571 students (around 3000 with disabilities) and 187 university staff. Sample sizes ranged from 4 to 2993. Eighteen studies were conducted in Spain (four written in Spanish), five in the UK, two in Germany, two in Italy, one in Portugal, one in Croatia, one in Sweden and one in Norway. Disabilities included mobility and physical disabilities, mental-behavioural disabilities, visual and hearing disabilities, and special learning needs.

Seventeen studies were quantitative (54.84%) with designs such as non-experimental, descriptive, cross-sectional, pre-experimental and quasi-experimental. Validated measures included scales like 'Formación del Profesorado Universitario en TIC como Apoyo al Alumnado con Discapacidad (FOPTICyDIS)', 'Escala Intercultural de Concepciones de Discapacidad (ISCD)', 'Encuesta MAPP' and others. Eleven qualitative studies (35.48%) involved interviews and focus groups. Three studies employed a mixed-methods design.

Most studies were conducted in Spain, raising questions about generalisability to other university contexts. The lower representation of qualitative studies compared to quantitative ones provides valuable insights into experiences but may limit understanding. Cultural and linguistic factors influence the effectiveness of validated measures, especially in the Spanish context. While the review provides valuable information, the geographical limitations, unequal distribution of studies and potential cultural influences on measures underscore the need to interpret results cautiously and promote diverse and representative research.

Thematic areas

Below are the main findings of this review, categorized into six thematic areas based on the primary objectives and outcomes of the articles found in each.

Perceptions and opinions of students with disabilities

In this first group, seven articles are included (Table 1). The perceptions and opinions of students with disabilities are vital in understanding their experience in higher education. Through their voices, valuable insights can be gained into their challenges, the barriers they encounter, and the specific needs they require for effective inclusion. Their testimonials contribute to reflections on accessibility, teacher attitudes, interaction with peers and institutional policies. Listening to and considering these perspectives enables the implementation of concrete measures to promote inclusive and equitable education for all

Table 1. Perceptions and opinions of students with disabilities.

Study	Objectives	Participants	Study design	Key findings
Bartz (2020)	Understand the experiences of students with disabilities in German universities.	Quantitative: 45 students with various disabilities Qualitative: 12 students	Mixed: Combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches	Issues of additional expenses and architectural barriers were identified. Digitization is helpful, but faculty need to adapt materials. Incidents with faculty members were described. Interaction with peers is positive.
Biggeri et al. (2020)	Assess the capabilities of students with disabilities in relation to classroom access, learning and interaction with their peers.	50 students with different types of disabilities	Qualitative	Students emphasize the importance of accessibility and improvements in campus mobility. Socialization is also considered crucial. Results vary based on disability and context.
Kermit and Holiman (2018)	To understand and explore the inclusion phenomenon, particularly about deafness, within a higher education environment.	Five deaf master's students	Qualitative	Inclusion in higher education for students with disabilities involves being among non-disabled peers. Professors play a crucial role, and their attitude and competence are determining factors. Students take responsibility for seeking necessary accommodations.
Mayo (2022)	To understand the needs and challenges students with disabilities face in the university.	73 students with disabilities	Quantitative	Students need help attending classes, participating in practical activities and taking exams. Professors require training in catering to diversity. Implemented measures are not individualized and do not address specific needs.
Martins and Moriña (2022)	To explore resilience factors in students with disabilities at a Portuguese public University as a variable that may determine academic success.	Four students with disabilities	Mixed	Students indicate architectural and social barriers. Protective factors are identified: resilience, family support and teacher support.
Moriña and Carballo (2020)	To understand the proposals for the University to progress toward Inclusive Education.	44 students with disabilities	Qualitative	There is a need for accessible spaces, well-planned transition processes, career guidance services, positive faculty attitude, development of inclusive practices, utilization of technologies and teacher training.
Pérez-Jorge et al. (2021)	To analyse the educational response that Spanish universities provide through programs, student support services or other services.	1720 students with disabilities	Quantitative	Resources allocated to space adaptation processes and material adaptation are the most common. Programs are heterogeneous; consistency in criteria is needed.

Source: Own elaboration.

students. Barriers to materials and facilities hinder access and persistence in higher education (Mayo, 2022; Moriña & Carballo, 2020). Planning, training and inclusive methodologies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are required to address student needs and achieve inclusive education proactively (Bartz, 2020; Martins & Moriña, 2022). Additionally, enhancing respect, mobility and usability of spaces is necessary to ensure equality and well-being for students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments (Biggeri et al., 2020). Tutoring services, teaching adaptations and faculty awareness are crucial and appear to be improving, according to the findings by Kermit and Holiman (2018). Nevertheless, challenges persist in removing architectural barriers and institutional and administrative responsiveness

(Pérez-Jorge et al., 2021). Consistency and collaboration are necessary to address the needs of these students more effectively.

Attitudes and perceptions towards disability

In the second group, nine articles are classified (Table 2). Attitudes and perceptions towards disability are of great importance today. These attitudes can influence the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in various contexts, including education. Understanding how individuals perceive and

Table 2. Attitudes and perceptions toward disability.

Study	Objectives	Participants	Study design	Key findings
Babić (2020)	Examine how professionals in support services for students with disabilities perceive the respect of the right to higher education for students with disabilities at the University of Zagreb.	10 university staff	Qualitative	Respect toward the right to higher education for young individuals with disabilities was perceived. However, challenges were identified regarding regular attendance, stereotypes, prejudices and lack of training among faculty.
Garabal-Barbeira et al. (2018)	To determine the attitudes of students and faculty members toward disability and understanding the variables that modify these attitudes.	121 professors 45 students	Quantitative	Faculty members need proper training. Both students and faculty members exhibit favourable attitudes toward including students with disabilities.
González-Castellano et al. (2021b)	To determine whether various personal factors determine the presence of barriers that arise in the teaching-learning process.	580 professors	Quantitative	Faculty in public universities in Andalusia support inclusion by adapting classrooms, content and methodologies. Faculty members with diversity training show a greater willingness toward inclusion and inclusive practices.
Gràcia et al. (2022)	Analyse attitudes toward disability in students at the University of Barcelona.	609 students	Quantitative	Students from different years, majors and faculties exhibit positive attitudes toward disability. Personal contact with individuals with disabilities also influences students' attitudes.
Lister et al. (2021)	To measure inclusion practices and perceptions at a distance education university in the United Kingdom.	Professors (327) Staff (139)	Quantitative	The findings revealed strong positive attitudes toward inclusive practice and identified training needs.
Luque de la Rosa and Gutiérrez (2022)	Analyse the educational and social inclusion of students with disabilities based on the perception of students in the Education and Learning Sciences field in Bologna, Italy.	272 students	Quantitative	The results suggest positive attitudes toward the inclusion of disabled students. Improvements in training are needed, and studies are required to drive action plans based on academic quality in higher education.
Mayo, Fernández and Roget (2020)	Analyse the needs and challenges of providing educational support to students with disabilities in the classroom and their relationship with various personal and collective variables.	200 faculty members (100 universities and 100 high schools)	Quantitative	High school teachers have more contact with students with disabilities, greater adaptability and higher levels of insecurity. University professors describe more negative teaching experiences.
Ortiz Colón et al. (2018)	Analyse the perception of the faculty at the University of Jaén regarding integrating students with disabilities and compare the interventions carried out among faculties.	300 professors	Quantitative	Faculty perceive that they need to be sufficiently prepared to attend to students. Faculty who perceives themselves as better prepared are in the Faculty of Social and Legal Sciences and the Health Sciences.
Polo Sánchez et al. (2018)	Analysing the inclusion of students with disabilities, emphasizing the importance of attitudes.	2521 students 33 students with disabilities 401 professors and academic staff 38 administrative staff	Quantitative	The university community exhibits favourable attitudes. The group with the most favourable attitudes are the faculty members.

Source: Own elaboration.

interact with disabilities is essential to promote an inclusive culture and eliminate social barriers. Exploring people's attitudes and perceptions can help us identify challenges and opportunities to enhance equal opportunities and dignified treatment of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of life. Babić (2020) and Lister et al. (2021) point out that although some faculty members exhibit positive attitudes, they must acquire more knowledge and be willing to make reasonable adjustments. Garabal-Barbeira et al. (2018) and Luque de la Rosa and Gutiérrez (2022) also found deficiencies in awareness and accessibility within the university community, reflecting that educational inclusion in higher education remains a challenge. In this context, teacher training in diversity is essential for achieving inclusive and quality higher education (González-Castellano et al., 2021a, 2021b; Lister et al., 2021; Mayo et al., 2020). Strengthening the pedagogical skills of educators and providing support and counselling services are also vital needs (Ortiz Colón et al., 2018; Polo Sánchez et al., 2018). More research on attitudes towards disability among university students is required (Gràcia et al., 2022), as well as the implementation of specific interventions to address identified knowledge and skill gaps.

Professional development and teacher training

We identified five articles focusing on professional development and teacher training (Table 3). The professional development and training of university faculty about educational inclusion are fundamental to ensuring a quality and equitable education for all students. It is essential to provide educators with the tools, knowledge and skills needed to adapt their educational practices, promote equal opportunities and address students' individual needs. Additionally, fostering an institutional culture that values and promotes inclusion as a guiding principle of higher education is crucial. All the articles in this group

Table 3. Professional development and teacher training.

Study	Objectives	Participants	Study design	Key findings
Aguirre et al. (2021)	Analysing faculty members' opinions and experiences regarding critical elements to achieve genuine inclusion of students with disabilities in the university.	119 professors	Qualitative	Despite the lack of training, faculty members demonstrate empathy and willingness to support students with disabilities. They need to acquire knowledge about disabilities and adaptations.
González-Castellano et al. (2021a)	Analysing to what extent barriers in the teaching-learning process are determined by personal factors such as gender, education or attitudes.	580 professors	Quantitative	There is a relationship between faculty members' perceptions and implementing more inclusive practices in the classroom.
Holmqvist et al. (2019)	To identify relationships between educators' preparedness, their need for further professional development and the courses offered to them.	104 professors	Mixed	Educators at University B appear more competent and organized in catering to students with SEN than those at University A. This could be attributed to mandatory courses and a community of practice at University B.
Moriña et al. (2019)	Understanding, describing and explaining how and why faculty members are trained to address the needs of students with disabilities.	119 professors	Qualitative	Faculty members receive general and specific training in pedagogy and ICT. It is necessary to include specific training and teaching practices with the disabled community.
Pearson et al. (2019)	Interviewing those involved in developing university inclusive policies to identify the personal, institutional and political barriers and facilitators encountered during the process.	267 professors and academic staff members	Quantitative	The IncSTEM project identified inclusive practices in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education to support students with disabilities. Staff perception, communication, curriculum and online practical work were addressed, promoting inclusion.

Source: Own elaboration.

agree that pedagogical training is crucial for improving teaching practices in all areas and ensuring students' academic success. Holmqvist et al. (2019) findings show that faculty members who have completed mandatory courses teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) have greater self-reported competence and knowledge than those without such training. Therefore, university policies should focus on enhancing teacher training, especially in topics related to diversity and inclusion (Aguirre et al., 2021), as campus accessibility and inclusion are closely tied to ongoing teacher training in diversity and the training demands in this field by universities (González-Castellano et al., 2021a, 2021b). Implementing continuous professional development and providing training support for both teaching staff and students is necessary, based on successful practices and the work done in previous projects (Moriña et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2019).

Accessibility and technology in higher education

Accessibility and the use of technology are fundamental aspects of higher education (Bygstad et al., 2022). Ensuring an accessible environment and leveraging technological tools enable students with disabilities to fully participate in their studies. The implementation of accessibility measures and the use of inclusive technologies promote equal opportunities and equitable access to education. In this context, it is crucial to explore how technology can be adapted and effectively utilized to enhance the educational experience of all students, regardless of their abilities. This group includes three articles (Table 4). The study by Fernandez-Batanero et al. (2022) points out that insufficient teacher training in digital competencies can hinder the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. Similarly, the findings from Perera et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of inclusive learning using technological platforms, as not only students with sensory disabilities benefit from the principles of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (Wilkens et al., 2021).

Policies and programs for students with disabilities

This group encompasses three articles that address policies and programs aimed at students with disabilities in the educational context as a fundamental means to ensure equality of opportunities and inclusion (Table 5). These initiatives aim to remove barriers and provide specific supports that enable students with disabilities to access, participate in and progress through their educational journey. Implementing inclusive policies and personalized support programs fosters diversity and creates more accessible and equitable educational environments. In this regard, Bunbury (2020) points out that university structure and the medical model of disability can hinder ensuring inclusion. Espada-Chavarria et al.

Table 4. Accessibility and technology in higher education.

Study	Objectives	Participants	Study design	Key findings
Fernandez-Batanero et al. (2022)	Understanding the level of training and technological knowledge university faculty members in the Faculties of Education have regarding the application of ICT as support for students with disabilities.	104 professors	Quantitative	Faculty members have low technological proficiency to integrate digital tools with disabled students. The gender variable is insignificant, but age shows a slight relationship, with younger individuals being more digitally competent.
Perera et al. (2021)	Analyse the reasons for promoting inclusive learning in virtual environments, the utilization of these environments in educational practices, and how technological platforms influence the learning of students with and without disabilities.	119 professors	Qualitative	The results highlight the significance of inclusive learning through technological platforms, their utilization by educators in inclusive educational practices and their impact on student learning, particularly for those with disabilities.
Wilkens et al. (2021)	Discussing the contribution of digitization for equal participation in higher education	408 students and 21 students with disabilities	Quantitative	The results indicate that not only students with sensory disabilities benefit from the principles of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5. Policies and programs for students with disabilities.

Study	Objectives	Participants	Study design	Key findings
Bunbury (2020)	To study whether there is an inclusive curriculum in the LLB course (Law degree based in London).	5 professors	Qualitative	The feasibility of an inclusive curriculum is questioned due to the lack of training, time and resources. The lack of teacher training, stigmas and non-apparent disabilities complicate the situation. University structure and the medical model of disability are obstacles.
Espada-Chavarria et al. (2020)	Analysing whether implementing the Generating Professional Competencies program increases the level of vocational maturity and knowledge of general competencies among university students with disabilities.	29 students with disability	Quantitative	The participants have lower levels of vocational maturity compared to other studies. The intervention improves vocational maturity.
Shapiro et al. (2019)	Investigate if there was a correlation between pre-entry support, increased confidence and academic performance.	88 students with disability	Quantitative	Students enjoyed attending both programs and after their completion, their confidence increased.

Source: Own elaboration.

(2020) delve into a program aimed at fostering professional competencies and indicate that programs targeting improved vocational maturity, knowledge and professional skills promote access to and attainment of internships, thereby contributing to the successful completion of studies for students with disabilities. In a similar vein, Shapiro et al. (2019) evaluated the satisfaction of students attending a workshop titled 'Taking responsibility for your own learning' over five years (2011–2016). In this small-scale research project, it was not possible to determine the extent to which there was a correlation between students attending the program and their assignment grades or exam results in their university studies. However, it was found that students enjoyed participating in the workshop.

Barriers and adjustments in the university environment

Finally, the last group comprises four articles that examine barriers and adjustments in the university environment that present significant challenges for the inclusion of students with disabilities (Table 6). These barriers can manifest in various forms, such as lack of physical accessibility, absence of adapted materials and resources, limited awareness and understanding of students' needs, among other aspects. Identifying and eliminating these barriers and implementing reasonable adjustments are essential to ensure an inclusive university environment where all students can fully participate and have equal opportunities in their educational experience. Aguilar et al. (2019) indicate that although lack of training can create insecurity in some faculty members, many are willing to make curriculum adaptations when necessary. However Barkas et al. (2022) point out that some students still perceive additional barriers in system procedures, even if unintentional. Therefore, the authors suggest that to achieve effective inclusion, educational institutions must provide disability training to create awareness and understand the daily challenges these students face. Additionally, laws, strategies, educational programs and inclusive materials are required to ensure equal opportunities in university environments (Aquino-Llinares & Moreno-Navarro, 2022; Valle-Flórez et al., 2021).

Discussion

Higher education should be an inclusive space for all students with disabilities, regardless of their abilities. However, various factors still restrict the access, presence, participation, persistence and progress of these students compared to their non-disabled peers. Achieving truly inclusive higher education necessitates raising awareness within the university community, transforming attitudes, training and approaches, and implementing measures, structures and systems to ensure full participation and potential for all students.

Numerous studies address this issue and propose solutions for inclusive education, which is a legal, ethical and social imperative. Building genuinely inclusive higher education benefits individuals with

Table 6. Barriers and adjustments in the university environment.

Study	Objectives	Participants	Study design	Key findings
Aguilar, Morina, and Perera (2019)	Analyse the various actions that the faculty of a Spanish university undertakes to contribute to the inclusion of students with disabilities.	20 professors	Qualitative	Faculty members adjusted methodology, materials and assessment, demonstrating willingness and dedication. Students were engaged and achieved comparable results without requiring extraordinary efforts from the faculty members.
Aquino-Llinares and Moreno-Navarro (2022)	Application of an inclusive practical experience in university: making the statistics course accessible to all individuals, regardless of their abilities.	56 undergraduate students (11 with disabilities)	Qualitative	Knowledge about disabilities among students is insufficient for 63%. Concern exists about the lack of protection, integration measures and removal of physical barriers. Training and educational innovation for faculty members are recommended.
Barkas et al. (2022)	Analyse the situation of students with non-apparent disabilities and special learning needs.	University A: 187 students with disabilities University B: 2 students	Qualitative	Progress has been made in supporting students and inclusive policies through physical modifications and staff training. However, some students still perceive additional barriers in system procedures.
Valle-Flórez et al. (2021)	Analyse the accessibility of facilities and resources for students, the willingness of faculty to attend to students with disabilities and SEN, curriculum adjustments made, and interactions of students with their peers and faculty members.	210 professors	Quantitative	Significant differences in the indicated factors are observed based on gender, age group, teaching experience and experience with students requiring educational support.

Source: Own elaboration.

disabilities and enriches the educational experience for all by promoting diverse perspectives and enhancing learning.

This study had three main objectives: analysing aspects of inclusion in the literature, identifying barriers students face in the EHEA and understanding strategies implemented in the EHEA to enhance student inclusion.

Institutional, methodological and technological barriers include architectural obstacles (Mayo, 2022), access to learning materials (Bartz, 2020) and the need for inclusive methodologies like UDL and diversity training (Biggeri et al., 2020; Mayo et al., 2020). Accessibility and technology present challenges due to deficiencies in awareness and accessibility (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022) and the need for UDL principles in educational platforms (Perera et al., 2021; Wilkens et al., 2021). Barriers and adjustments in the university environment require UDL principles (Aguilar et al., 2019), specific disability training (Aquino-Llinares & Moreno-Navarro, 2022) and collaboration between welfare services and universities (Barkas et al., 2022; Valle-Flórez et al., 2021).

Interactions between students with disabilities and teachers and peers show that attitudes and teacher training are critical. Improving attitudes through diversity training (Babić, 2020; Mayo, 2022;

González-Castellano et al., 2021a, 2021b; Lister et al., 2021; Luque de la Rosa & Gutiérrez, 2022; Ortiz Colón et al., 2018) and promoting inclusive attitudes through interaction (Gràcia et al., 2022; Lister et al., 2021) are necessary. Professional development and teacher training enhance inclusive practices (Aguirre et al., 2021) and are mandatory in some countries (Holmqvist et al., 2019). Proposals include specific diversity training and access requirements related to diversity care (Moriña et al., 2019).

Policy change proposals emphasize adopting a social approach to remove attitudinal and social barriers (Bunbury, 2020) and implementing programs to improve vocational maturity and professional skills (Espada-Chavarria et al., 2020).

The second objective identified barriers faced by students with disabilities in the EHEA. Physical, technological, methodological, social and attitudinal barriers are significant. Physical and technological barriers include inaccessible infrastructures and lack of adaptive technologies (Bartz, 2020; Mayo, 2022). Social barriers involve stigma and lack of support, leading to social isolation and decreased self-esteem (Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2021). Attitudinal barriers from teachers and students influence perceptions and treatment, affecting educational and social experiences (Gràcia et al., 2022).

The third objective examined strategies implemented in the EHEA to improve inclusion. Strategies include teacher training and continuous professional development, leveraging personal experiences and institutional policies and programs. Teacher training in diversity and adaptive technologies (Biggeri et al., 2020; González-Castellano et al., 2021a, 2021b) and continuous professional development based on successful practices (Pearson et al., 2019) are essential. Personal experiences of students with disabilities provide valuable insights for improving inclusion (Kermit & Holiman, 2018). Institutional policies supporting accessibility, social inclusion and academic success are necessary (Bunbury, 2020; Espada-Chavarria et al., 2020).

The results indicate that including students with disabilities in the EHEA remains a challenge. Research shows a deficit approach in achieving rights for this group, with improvement measures focusing on specific situations without institutionalized pathways for operational implementation strategies. Measures such as professional development, ongoing diversity training, inclusive methodologies like UDL, and accessible ICT are proposed. Improving accessibility, valuing experiences of students with disabilities, raising awareness and implementing attitude change programs are necessary.

However, the lack of a global institutional and administrative response still presents obstacles. Students' resilience and dedication are crucial for their success, but these qualities should be aspects of excellence, not a struggle for rights. A joint effort is needed to develop institutionalized and consistent policies and programs across the EHEA, ensuring collaboration among European institutions to guarantee access and participation for all students.

Despite efforts, this review has limitations. The inclusion of studies is limited by search terms and databases, peer-reviewed articles in English or Spanish and the lack of access to two articles. These limitations highlight the need for caution in interpreting results and the importance of future research to gain a comprehensive understanding of educational inclusion for students with disabilities in the EHEA. Future research should support current findings and implement necessary actions to improve inclusion.

Disclosure statement

About the authors

P. Solís-García is a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Oviedo. Contracted Ph.D. Professor at the International University of La Rioja, where she directs the Master's Degree in Educational Attention in Addictive Behaviors in Children and Adolescents. She works as an Associate Professor at the University of Oviedo and a member of the accredited Research Group on Disability (GID). Her research focuses on perceived needs in the ageing process of people with intellectual disabilities and on studying teachers' attitudes towards educational inclusion and disability. Google Scholar Profile: https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=wLrftzoAAAAJ&hl=es.

A. Barreiro-Collazo is a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Oviedo. Contracted Ph.D. Professor at the International University of La Rioja and at the Padre Ossó Faculty, affiliated with the University of Oviedo. She also continues to work as a General Health Psychologist in the field of child and adolescent and adult psychology. Her research focuses on cyber aggression and victimization and on educational inclusion. Google Scholar Profile: https://scholar.google.es/citations?hl=es&user=uJ0SX38AAAAJ.

M. Rodríguez-Correa is a Ph.D. in Pedagogy from the Universidade da Coruña with honors cum laude and a degree in Pedagogy from the Central University of Venezuela, with master's and postgraduate studies in Human Development Psychology and Management of Disability and Dependency. She has taught at the preschool, primary and university levels. Her research focuses on the analysis of the integration of ICT in teaching, innovation and improvement of educational institutions, as well as ICT and inclusion. Google Scholar Profile: https://scholar.google.es/citations?hl=es&user=hNBwHWEAAAAJ.

E. Delgado-Rico is a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Granada. Accredited as an expert psychologist in Clinical Neuropsychology by the Official College of Psychologists and as a Contracted Ph.D. Professor by ANECA. Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Psychobiology at the International University of La Rioja and a member of the research group Neuropsychology and Psychoneuroimmunology applied to childhood, adults and the elderly (CTS-581) at the University of Granada. Google Scholar Profile: https://scholar.google.es/citations?hl=es&user=n1CgQEQAAAAJ.

S. Real-Castelao is a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Oviedo. Accredited as a Contracted Ph.D. Professor by ANECA. Currently working as Academic Subdirector at the UNED Ponferrada Center. She has held teaching positions in Master's programs at UNIR and the position of Director of Research and Postgraduates and Teaching Staff at PUCESE (Ecuador). She develops projects and research on educational inclusion and social rights. Google Scholar Profile: https://scholar.google.es/citations?hl=es&user=dxaPZqoAAAAJ.

ORCID

P. Solís-García 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2962-5819
A. Barreiro-Collazo 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9640-4680
M. Rodríguez-Correa 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3950-4292
E. Delgado-Rico 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9424-8928
S. Real-Castelao 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0167-865X

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